Margaret Laurence wrote four books for children. The only thing that is interesting about them is that she wrote them at all. They might be called a footnote to her adult fiction and criticism, but they are not really even that. They are irrelevant, not only to Laurence’s larger body of work, but to the larger body of literature for children in Canada. All four books, Jason’s Quest, Six Darn Cows, The Olden Days Coat, and The Christmas Birthday Story, were written in the late 1960s and the 1970s when children’s literature was burgeoning in Canada in the same way that literature for adults was.

Before the 1970s there had been no sizable body of literature for children in this country. There had been the splendid and enduring animal stories of Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, Marshall Saunders’s best-selling Beautiful Joe, and Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Green Gables heroine, who was so popular that baby girls from Poland to the Orient were being named Anne or Shirley after her.

There was little else in these years (in some years as few as thirty or forty books for young people were published); in fact, there was so little and it was so mediocre that, for four years, the Canadian Library Association’s book-of-the-year award, established in 1947, was not awarded. In the 1940s and 1950s there was
a growing collection of retellings of Native tales, only one of which was written by a Native Canadian (George Clutusi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer*). Roderick Haig Brown and John F. Hayes were writing workmanlike but pedestrian historical novels. Catherine Anthony Clark alone was trying something different, writing fantasies rooted in Native mythology and the British Columbia landscape but centred on the adventures of contemporary children. Although her stories had not the depth or writing skill to make them last, they were fresh and original. Then, in 1956, Farley Mowat published *Lost in the Barrens* and, the following year, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. In 1962 Jean Little published *Mine for Keeps*. In the 1960s literature for children in Canada had arrived.

In the 1960s and 1970s writers, who are read today as avidly as when they were first published, were launching their first works: Joan Clark, Brian Doyle, James Houston, Dennis Lee, Kevin Major. Margaret Laurence did not seem to be aware of any of them. In *Dance on the Earth*, she wrote that her children were reading Arthur Ransome, E. Nesbit, Mary Norton, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Graham—all the best British writers. "I read those books too, and learned a great deal about the children's books that had not been available, or even written, when I was young" (*Dance* 175). She was, of course, living in England with her children at that time, and she did not seem to have truly understood what she was reading, at least not as a writer.

*Jason's Quest*, published in 1970, is about a mole (Jason) in search of a cure for the strange disease afflicting his ancient city of Molanium (founded by the moles who had landed in Britain with the legions). He meets Oliver, an owl in search of wisdom, and Calico and Topaz, two cats in search of noble deeds to perform. This unusual collection of predators and prey set off together for Londinium, happily singing, "Four for One and One for Four;/ Together til the journey's o'er" (26).

The adventure follows predictably with the usual complement of villains (Winstanley the con cat; the wicked Great Rat; and the evil Blades gang) and friends (P.C. Wattles the police cat; Mrs. Weepworthy the once-famous singer; and Perdita the beautiful young mole). In the end Jason discovers that his version of the golden fleece is the knowledge that Molanium, steeped in ancient
tradition, is suffering from boredom. In gratitude for his discovery, the citizenry offers him the ancient and exalted position of Venerable Mole. He declines, preferring the more modern, democratic title and position of mayor. His first move as mayor is to change Molanium's name to Moleville (neither of these updates will mean anything to late-twentieth-century children).

There does not seem to be an intrinsic reason for these stock characters to be moles or cats or anything but people. In fact, Laurence wrote in Dance on the Earth, the inspiration for Molanium came when she realized that the grounds of Elm Cottage where she lived were infested with moles (what she did, actually, was call in the exterminator). The fantasy is neither original nor particularly imaginative and, unfortunately, its tone is arch.

While the story is clearly derived from those of Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Graham, and A.A. Milne, its author does not seem to have grasped how—or why—the originals worked. Kenneth Graham's animals, even in their waistcoats and watches, behave like moles and toads and water rats. Potter's animals are every bit as faithful to nature (despite Peter Rabbit's little blue coat), and Milne, of course, was dealing with stuffed toys, though even they are more like their prototypes than Laurence's animals.

Furthermore, while the peaceable kingdom is one of the human race's dearest dreams, a story about two cats, an owl, and a mole harmoniously off on an adventure together defies the possibility of the most willing to suspend disbelief.

Clara Thomas calls Jason's Quest "a joyfully inventive tale about a mole and its friends, it is [in] essence a confrontation between the forces of darkness and light."1 In her book on Canadian children's literature, The Republic of Childhood, Sheila Egoff says that Laurence's "widely acclaimed success as a novelist makes her one book of fantasy for children, Jason's Quest (1970), the most disappointing book in Canadian children's literature."2 Egoff might have the last word on Jason's Quest. A great many booksellers, librarians, and parents devoted to a loved novelist tried to make it a success but few children took to it.

The other strength these British fantasy writers had that Laurence had not for her British-set story was that they were
writing about countryside they had known and loved all their lives. J.R.R. Tolkien’s shire was Graham’s shire and Potter’s and Milne’s. It was not Laurence’s, no matter how attractive she found it.

Laurence did better in this way with Six Darn Cows. This story is written to a limited vocabulary for a series James Lorimer was producing in the 1970s to encourage parents and teachers to teach reading from books written in Canada with Canadian settings that described “real lives of real kids” (Dance 217). Laurence said that she based her story on “things I knew from the life of children on small farms” (Dance 217). Six Darn Cows is about two kids who leave a gate open, an invitation to the pastured cows to stray into the woods. Six of them do. A pleasant little tale but without much life. The book was a commission, and quite likely (and not surprisingly) the author’s heart was not in the work.

The only one of Laurence’s books for children that has outlived her is The Olden Days Coat and that may be because Atlantis Films made a charming film from it, a film that has become a CBC Canadian Christmas perennial. The Olden Days Coat is a time-cross story in which a ten-year-old girl named Sal goes with her mother and father to spend Christmas with her grandmother. Bored and resentful at having to be away from her friends, Sal rummages in an old trunk. She finds a Red-River coat that her grandmother wore as a child. She puts it on and is, at once, transported back in time where she meets a girl named Sarah. The two spend a happy time together during which Sal finds a little wooden box Sarah has dropped and returns it to her. Sarah, of course, is Sal’s grandmother and, while the incident is wiped from both memories, grandmother and granddaughter feel a deep sense of communion when old Sarah gives young Sal the little wooden box for her Christmas present.

These two Canadian-set stories share one quality that characterizes our books for children. They are down-to-earth, no-nonsense stories. There are no flights of fancy here, no Pucks, no fairies of any kind. Even in The Olden Days Coat, the time shift is got past in jig time so that the real purpose of the story can be got on with. And the real purpose of Laurence’s children’s stories is the moral contained in them.
There is no lingering over character either. Considering that Laurence herself said, "I am concerned mainly, I think, with finding...a form through which the characters can breathe" (Gadgetry 55), this is sad.

*The Christmas Birthday Book* is a nativity story originally written for the Unitarian congregation of which Laurence and her children were members. In her version of the story, the mother is not a virgin impregnated by a holy spirit, there are no shepherds and no angels, and the kings show up almost by accident—the frankincense and myrrh are to be put in the baby’s bath. Although this version has certainly lost the power of the myth, Laurence’s is a sweet, gentle story. And there is probably no clearer statement of her belief in Christianity or her love for and faith in her fellow humans than here. Of her four books for children, this one lacks, totally, the unwitting condescension that marks the other three. As she wrote, “I retold [the story] in a way that I myself understand it and believe in it. Jesus is spoken of as a beloved child, born into a loving family, a child who grew up to be a wise teacher, and a friend to all people. That is really how I think of our Lord” (*Dance* 221).

The condescension that marks the other three books was not a conscious one. Because *The Christmas Birthday Story* received mixed notices from book reviewers, Laurence remarked: “Many reviewers didn’t deign to notice it because it was a children’s book” (*Dance* 220). While it is all too true about that attitude of book reviewers toward books for children, Laurence could not see at the same time what was missing in her own work.

Dr. Jessica Latshaw, an immigrant from the United States and now head of the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, says that she began to be interested in Canadian literature when she first read Margaret Laurence. Of Laurence’s children’s books, however, she once remarked to me, “She seemed to have no understanding of her intended audience. Her children’s books are not connected to her writing. They seem to be left-handed exercises. It seems strange that she was as protective of the realities of life in her writing for children as she was exploitive of the dynamics and ambiguities of life in her adult fiction.”
Laurence is not the only writer of fine literature for adults to make the mistake of thinking she could write well for children. Alfred Knopf is reported to have said once that his most dreaded moments as a publisher were when one of his successful novelists would all but tiptoe into his office, lay a manuscript softly on his desk, and say, “I have written a little something for children.”

Few writers manage to cross that line—in either direction. British writers Rumer Godden and Jane Gardam have done—and well. Canadian writer Joan Clark is good at both. Margaret Atwood’s only successful children’s book, Anna’s Pet, was written with her aunt, children’s writer Joyce Barkhouse. A.A. Milne badly wanted to write for adults but his efforts were never any good. Neither were Kenneth Graham’s. The truth is that writing for children comes as naturally to those who are good at it as writing for adults does for those who do that. What is more, a writer writes a story for children “because a children’s story is the best art-form for something you have to say.”

“From time to time Laurence found refreshment in writing children’s books,” Clara Thomas observes. Possibly, but I do not think Margaret Laurence was either as casual about or dismissive of writing for children as Thomas would have us believe. I think it was simply not the best art form for what she had to say, except for The Christmas Birthday Story, which said exactly what she wished to say—but not to children.

Probably there was too much ambiguity in Laurence for children’s books. I think, too, that she did not feel enough delight in pure storytelling to give her heart to the writing of stories for children.

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